

NATIONAL SEMINAR ON 'CULTURE, LITERATURE AND CHILDREN'

**AT CHANDIGARH, 26-28
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—NITA BERRY

deliberated on vital issues pertaining to children and their literature in the present day context. The venue was Chandigarh. the occasion, a National Seminar on 'Culture, Literature and Children', held under the joint auspices of the Punjab Sahitya Akademi and Department of Cultural Affairs, Punjab.

It was the first of its kind for Punjab. Today, the dropout rate of children after primary school touches 37 percent and the failure figures at school leaving even more alarming. There were seven sessions devoted to 'Culture, Literature and Children', 'Media and Values,' 'Patterns of Identity in Regional Literature', 'Physical and Psychological Needs', 'State, Society and Children' and 'Challenges Today'. Each topic was eruditely dealt with by noted scholars in the field, and followed by an open session.

"There can be no two opinions that more good books for children are required," asserted child psychologist and writer, Dr. Ira Saxena. "They are essential to growth, prosperity and progress and necessary tools for achieving total literacy. And readership, according to Mr. Anand Sarup, then the Chairman of National Book Trust, Delhi, "can be inculcated in childhood not through textbooks but 'readable' books. Books that feel good, look good and sound good become a child's loved companions."

It is important to recognize at the outset that the child is a special being with special needs, even special rights (as detailed by Dr. H.K. Devsare, and Vijay Nagpal of the Department of Law, Punjab University), who needs to lose himself sometimes in a world of his own. Childhood is but a brief interlude, packed with idealism, strong friendships, creativity and innovation. But insecurities and adjustments do form the other side of the coin. "Writers for children have to be constantly aware of these various

A motley mix, at first glance, saffron turbans, flowing beards of every hue, bright Kanjeevarams, staid khadi.... But all lovers of the word ! And perturbed by the dismal scene in children's literature in the country. Over the course of three days, 200 writers, children, academicians, psychologists and bureaucrats from Punjab and other states,

childhood facets, and to understand their physical and psychological make-up at every age," commented Dr. Kavary Bhatt, an award-winning children's author who is a surgeon by profession. "Only then can writers create 3-dimensional characters in their fiction that will touch the child reader."

Meaningful literature can indeed go a long way in helping children inculcate desirable values to equip them for the future. This could counteract too, the detrimental effects of the media and environment. In the course of a session on Media and Values, chaired by M.G. Gautam, Director of Doordarshan, Jalandhar, tremendous concern was voiced over the mindless fare and advertising dished out by the 'idiot box', which reduced children to irrational consumers. Rama Rattan, Secretary of the Punjab Sahitya Akademi, explained how this new consumer culture alienated the child from the mainstream. T.V. Filmmaker G.S. Channi described how a psychic structure of expectations is built up amongst young minds so that they become increasingly impatient and restless as real life expectations are never fulfilled.

Interestingly, most psychological problems in children can be traced to adults or parents, and this calls for honest self-analysis at the start, Dr. Bhatt pointed out. However, as Dr. J.S. Neki said amidst laughter, "it is a great mercy of nature that most children grow up to be normal in spite of parents!"

But as Manorama Jafa, writer and pioneer in the movement for better children's books in India reminded, books must primarily provide the child with reading pleasure. "Literary style and the imaginative qualities are becoming increasingly important in the new literature for children. Any message to a child can only be conveyed in a subtle manner, without being didactic or reducing

the charm of the book. The real secret of a child's book lies not merely in its being less dry and less difficult, but more rich in interest, either true to nature or fantasy, more exquisite in art, more abundant in every quality that responds to a child's keener and fresher perceptions."

Literature is of course a mirror of the times. This is especially true of children's literature where writers try to depict a picture of a world which children recognize. Sometimes, this signifies a longing for a better world. Regional peculiarities constitute a particular culture which gives literature its individual identity, and rich, local colour. Noted writers in regional languages-like S.G. Haider (Urdu), Gurdial Singh (Punjabi), Surekha Panandikar (Marathi), Swapna Dutta (Bengali), J.N. Mohanty (Oriya), detailed patterns of identity in their regional literature for children down the ages, beginning with the oral tradition. Surekha Panadikar and S.G. Haider particularly delighted with their musical rendering of folk literature.

However, certain universal values cut across regional barriers. Values like love, brotherhood and honesty endure through a world of changing perceptions, and are reflected in books for the young everywhere.

It is a regrettable state of affairs indeed that despite our having writers of talent and vision, there is no sustained effort to promote children's literature in the country. There is a wide gap between the supply and demand of such literature in the local languages. The alarming insignificance of budget allocation to education is a pointer. The Government spends just 2.7% of its total expenditure on education, as compared to 18.5% spent by South Korea and 19% by Singapore.

Anand Sarup, speaking in earthy Punjabi to the immense delight of his audience, listed the many misconceptions about children's

literature. He also summed up challenges of the present, recommending an identification of target groups, a careful evaluation of all forces, and a decision on what should be promoted for the New World.

A rare spirit of camaraderie pervaded the sessions' volatile questioning and loud thinking in the packed conference hall of Kisan Bhavan. And as the sun set in the beautiful garden city of Chandigarh, delegates were treated to colourful cultural programmes by children at Bal Bahavan. The annual Hannibal Awards Ceremony, instituted by 'Sarang' to encourage writers and illustrators of children's literature, honoured the Punjabi writer K. Jasbir Bhullar and young artist Gurdish Singh, for the year 1989-90. Another evening highlight was the release of a book of poems entitled *Reflections at Dawn*, written by Nagma Virk, a child writer. Captivating classical dances by the children of Patiala, a dance

drama by children of Chandigarh and the Mother Teresa Institute—enacting animal stories written by the year's best writer, and a presentation of village games through dance by children of Khanna, held the audience enthralled.

At the end of the Seminar, one wonders, however, will the recommendations boil down to nought once the dust has settled? Will invaluable suggestions be lost in the musty files of a government department, never to see the light of day? For that matter, do such seminars serve any practical purpose at all?

Perhaps the answer would be to form an autonomous body of writers to follow up the recommendations and to reach certain goals. To create a Bal Sahitya Academy, for instance. The field is an empty one. There is space enough for all the writers of the New World here.

One of our most serious obligations to ourselves and to children is to consider carefully, not just what books we think are the best ones, but also, what our choices imply about our ideas of excellence.

—Perry Nodelman